

The Washington Post, 29 Nov 82

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We Need This Missile

Sen. Ernest F. Hollings, in his Nov. 23 op-ed piece ["We Don't Need This Missile"], seems to appreciate the fact that the United States faces a serious military imbalance with the Soviet Union. However, in recommending cancellation of the MX/Peacekeeper project, he does not appear to understand one of the chief sources of that imbalance—the serious weakening of the deterrent capability of our strategic triad.

Over the last two decades, this nation has maintained a stable deterrent by means of a strong strategic triad consisting of land-based ICBMs, manned bombers and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. The unique characteristics of these triad components bolster deterrence by acting in concert to complicate Soviet attack planning, and hedge against a possible technological breakthrough that could threaten the viability of any single strategic system. Unfortunately, over the last several years, the Soviets have deployed new land-based strategic missiles of such quality and in such quantity as to seriously jeopardize the survivability of the ICBM leg of the triad. In addition to this survivability problem, dramatic improvements in the "hardness" of critical Soviet military assets also have reduced the effectiveness of our current ICBM force.

It is these fundamental weaknesses in our deterrent capability that the Peacekeeper missile, deployed in a closely spaced basing (CSB) mode, rectifies. Unlike our current Minuteman ICBM force which—contrary to Hollings' assertion—does not have an effective hard target capability, the Peacekeeper will be able to retaliate effectively against the full range of high-value Soviet strategic weaponry, including that weaponry "hardened" (to withstand blast) and requiring prompt response. In a CSB deployment, the Peacekeeper also—again, contrary to Hollings' assertion—will possess the ability to survive a Soviet first strike. Bringing these two important characteristics to the ICBM force, the Peacekeeper will reduce the current imbalance and bolster deterrence. Moving in the direction of a strategic dyad of bombers and submarines, as Hollings' article appears to suggest, is not an answer to the growing weaknesses in our deterrent capability,

but a near-term prescription for a potential far-term disaster.

Hollings challenges the Peacekeeper's survivability in CSB, charging that the Soviets could avoid the effects of nuclear fratricide by means of earth-penetrating warheads, or the simultaneous detonation of large warheads. He also charges that the Soviets could prevent the Peacekeeper from retaliating by exploding

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nuclear weapons high above CSB field until other weapons destroy the Peacekeeper missiles (pindown) and that CSB silos cannot be hardened to the levels required to make the system effective.

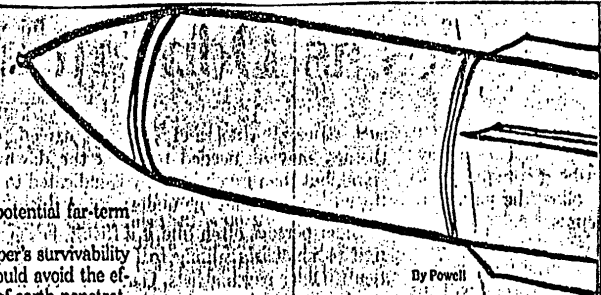
A wide range of experts, both in and outside the government, examined these and many other issues in minute detail over the last several months. Contrary to the claims of Hollings, the consensus reached by these experts was that:

- The current and projected Soviet strategic force would be ineffective against the Peacekeeper in a CSB deployment;

- The Soviets could seek to improve the effectiveness of their force against CSB by the late 1980s, deploying very large-yield weapons, but attacks with such weapons would be risky and give the Soviets no confidence of success;

- The Soviets, by means of an expensive and risky technological program, might be able to develop and deploy highly accurate, earth-penetrating weapons or other advanced concepts by the mid- to late 1990s. However, a number of enhancement options (simple countermeasures, deceptive basing, ballistic missile defense, or deep underground basing) could provide an effective counter to Soviet efforts. In fact, countermeasures against earth penetrators would be relatively inexpensive and so simple that the Soviets probably would not try this approach;

- "Pindown," while theoretically possible, is not a



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practical or dependable challenge to the Peacekeeper in CSB because it would have to be employed continuously and flawlessly for several hours during highly stressful wartime conditions and because it would consume a large portion of the Soviet strategic force without destroying a single missile; and

- It is possible to build silos hardened to the levels necessary to make a CSB system effective, since the task does not involve the development of new technology.

As the views of these experts indicate, we have in CSB a survivable, flexible and—at nearly half the expense of the previous administration's recommendation—cost-effective means of deploying the deterrence-essential Peacekeeper missile. Some have argued that the Peacekeeper should be maintained only as a research and development program. This response to the strategic problems we face is both inadequate and unnecessary. The Peacekeeper is a thoroughly researched and fully capable deterrent system. As such, the national security requires that we waste no time in moving it from the laboratory to the field, where its full deterrence potential will be realized.

The issues we face today are highly complex. This is especially true of those issues affecting war and peace. Because the Peacekeeper is one such issue, we cannot afford to consider its merits lightly nor come to easy conclusions without a careful examination of the facts. In the weeks ahead, this administration will make available to Congress and the people of this nation the full range of facts on the Peacekeeper and closely spaced basing. I am confident that if due consideration is given to these facts, MX/CSB will receive the strong support it warrants.

The writer is secretary of defense.